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ABSTRACT

Research has suggested that high levels of sexual guilt lead to decreased exposure to sexual behaviors, sexual stimuli, or sexual information. A study was conducted to examine the interrelationships among the variables of sexual guilt, sexual experience, sexual misinformation, and sexual satisfaction. College students (N=125), selected through a stratified cluster sampling technique, completed a questionnaire consisting of: (1) Mosher Forced Choice Inventory Sexual Guilt subscale; (2) Brady Levitt Sexual Experience Scale; (3) a list of 40 common sexual myths and fallacies; and (4) three scales measuring sexual satisfaction. Preliminary analyses revealing no significant differences between males and females allowed for combining of all data for main analyses. The results indicated that sexual guilt was positively related to sexual misinformation and to two measures of sexual satisfaction. Sexual experience was negatively related to sexual misinformation and positively correlated to two indices of sexual satisfaction. These findings suggest that an important consideration when treating a couple for sexual dissatisfaction may be feelings of guilt associated with past and present sexuality, and that education and experience may be effective modes for the alleviation of sexual guilt. (Author/NB)

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Interrelationships among Sexual Guilt, Experience, Misinformation and Satisfaction

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Running head: SEXUAL GUILT

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Abstract

In this study, the interrelationships between the variables of sexual guilt, sexual experience, sexual misinformation and sexual satisfaction were examined. One hundred and twenty-five college students, selected through a stratified cluster sampling technique, completed a questionnaire consisting of: a) Mosher Forced Choice Inventory Sexual Guilt subscale; b) a list of 40 common sexual myths and fallacies; c) Brady Levitt Sexual Experience Scale; and d) three scales measuring sexual satisfaction. Preliminary analyses revealing no significant differences between males and females allowed for combining of all data for main analyses. Results indicate that sexual guilt was positively related to sexual misinformation (p .001) and two measures of sexual satisfaction (p .05 and p .001). Sexual experience was negatively related to sexual misinformation (p .05) and positively correlated to two indices of sexual satisfaction (p .05 and p .001).

Interrelationships Between Sexual Guilt, Experience, Misinformation and Satisfaction

The personality disposition of guilt has been defined as, "a generalized expectancy for self-predicted punishment for violations or anticipating violating internalized standards of moral behaviors" (Mosher, 1979a, p. 106). It has been repeatedly demonstrated that these expectancies for self-mediated punishment has an inhibiting effect on behaviors in a variety of contexts (Mosher, 1979b; Mosher & Gross, 1971; Persons, 1970).

One aspect of guilt that has received a great deal of attention has been the phenomenon of sexual guilt. Research findings have revealed that sexual guilt is negatively correlated with sexual arousal to erotic stimuli (Mosher & Abramson, 1977; Ray & Thompson, 1974) and with unobtrusive measures of amount of time voluntarily spent viewing erotic materials (Love, Sloan & Schmidt, 1967; Schill & Chapin, 1972). Sexual guilt also has a negative relationship with various measures of sexual experience (Abramson, 1976; Langstrom, 1973; Mosher, 1973), providing support to the hypothesis that guilt is often associated with an inhibition of behavior. Furthermore, it was reported (Schwartz, 1973) that individuals high in sexual guilt retain less information on sex-related topics than do low-guilt persons.

In summary, it appears that high levels of sexual guilt leads to decreased exposure to sexual behaviors, sexual stimuli or

sexual information. To test this hypothesis, Mosher (1979b) utilized a questionnaire consisting of the Mosher Forced Choice Guilt Inventory Sexual Guilt subscale (FCGI; Mosher, 1966), Brady Levitt Sexual Experience Scale (Brady & Levitt, 1965), and a list of 41 common sexual myths and fallacies, to investigate the relationships between sexual guilt, sexual experience and sexual information. Based on the responses of 175 college students, Mosher reported a positive correlation between sexual guilt and sexual misinformation, and a negative correlation between sexual guilt and sexual experience.

The present investigation represents a replication and extension of the Mosher (1979b) study, with the addition of a fourth variable, sexual satisfaction. Previous research studies concerning sexual satisfaction have reported positive relationships between this aspect of sexuality and self-actualization (Paxton & Turner, 1978), quality of emotional relationships within the family (Netterblatt & Uddenberg, 1975) and sexual experience (Murray, 1978), while a negative relationship has been reported between satisfaction and sexual guilt (Murray, 1978).

The specific questions addressed by the present study were: 1) What are the relationships between sexual guilt, experience, misinformation and satisfaction? and 2) Are there any gender differences relative to these four variables?

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 125 college students selected through a stratified cluster sampling technique. This approach involves reaching freshmen and sophomores via a random selection of general education courses, while selecting juniors, seniors, and graduate students through a stratification, and then random selection of upper division and graduate courses by major department. Through this process, students in 14 classes were chosen and asked to voluntarily participate in this study. Of 300 research questionnaires distributed in these classes, 133, or 44%, were returned. Eight of these were subsequently discarded due to being incomplete, leaving a final sample size of 125. This sample consisted of 69 females and 56 males, ranging in age from 18 to 58, with a median of 22 and a mean of 24.2. Class level distribution of these subjects was: freshmen, 12%; sophomore, 19%; junior, 20%; senior, 46%; and graduate, 3%.

Instruments

The research questionnaire consisted of a demographic section including questions pertaining to age, sex, class level, marital and dating status, and sexual orientation and history, and four other sections measuring sexual experience, sexual satisfaction, sexual misinformation, and sexual guilt.

Sexual guilt. The sexual guilt subsection of the Mosher FCGI, Form M (Mosher, 1966) was used to assess subjects' level of sex guilt. This measure is a 28-item sentence completion test with a corrected split-half reliability of .97. Respondents were instructed to complete a sentence such as, "Sex relations before marriage..." with one of two responses provided. One of the responses contributes to a score indicating sexual guilt while the other response would not.

Sexual experience. This variable was assessed through a modified version of the Brady Levitt Sexual Experience Scale (Brady & Levitt, 1965) and consisted of 12 sexual activities to which the subject indicates whether or not he or she had experienced that particular activity.

Sexual misinformation. A list of 40 common myths and fallacies derived from McCary's textbook, Human Sexuality (1967) was used to measure sexual misinformation. The number of incorrect items endorsed indicated a subject's level of misinformation.

Sexual satisfaction. Three separate scales, two of which were adapted from the Sexual Adjustment Inventory (Stuart, Stuart, Maurice & Szasz, 1975), measured different aspects of the subjects' sexual satisfaction. The first scale assessed interpersonal aspects of satisfaction and consisted of 12 Likert-type items that the subject rated from very dissatisfied to very

satisfied. An example of these items is, "The way we talk about improving our sexual activities." The second scale centered on satisfaction with 22 specific sexual activities such as "Seeing my partner nude" or "Having my genitals caressed." The subjects rated each activity as to how often each was experienced and how much pleasure was obtained. The third scale measured the subjects' satisfaction in the broader context of their lives since becoming sexually active. This was ascertained by having them rate five adjectives which ranged from "terrific" to "terrible" according to how often they had felt that way since becoming sexually active.

Procedures

Subjects were contacted during regular meetings of the courses selected through the stratified cluster sampling technique. In these classes, the experimenter provided a brief description of the project and assurances of the confidentiality of all responses. Questionnaires were then distributed with instructions to return the completed forms during a subsequent class meeting.

Results

Gender Differences

A series of t-tests were calculated comparing the means of males and females on: a) main experimental variables and b) levels of reported satisfaction on each of the 22 sexual activities on

the third Sexual Satisfaction Scale. Additionally, a series of chi-square analyses were performed to test the significance of proportions of females and males who endorsed the 12 sexual activities on the Sexual Experience scale. Results indicate no statistically significant differences between male and female subjects on any of these analyses. Thus, it was deemed appropriate to combine all subjects for subsequent analyses.

Main Analyses

Table 1 presents Pearson product-moment correlations, calculated to assess all possible pairwise combinations of the variables of guilt, misinformation, experience and satisfaction.

Sexual guilt. Sexual guilt was positively correlated with sexual misinformation $r(125) = .30$, $p < .001$; negatively correlated with sexual experience, $r(125) = -.29$, $p < .001$; and negatively correlated with interpersonal sexual satisfaction and satisfaction with specific sexual activities ($r(115) = -.17$, $p < .05$; $r(119) = -.33$, $p < .001$; respectively).

Sexual experience. Sexual experience was negatively correlated with sexual misinformation $r(125) = .18$, $p < .05$. Positive relationships of statistical significance were observed between sexual experience and interpersonal sexual satisfaction and satisfaction with specific sexual activities ($r(115) = .21$, $p < .05$; $r(115) = .37$, $p < .001$; respectively).

Sexual misinformation. No significant relationship were obtained between sexual misinformation and any of the three Satisfaction Scales.

Sexual satisfaction. In addition to investigating the relationships between sexual satisfaction and the other three main variables, the three satisfaction scales were correlated with each other to determine whether they were measuring the same or similar constructs. The correlations between Satisfaction Scales 1 and 2 was $r(115) = .34$, $p < .001$; Scales 1 and 3, $r(115) = .54$, $p < .001$; and Scales 2 and 3, $r(115) = .23$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the interrelationships between sexual guilt, sexual experience, sexual information, and sexual satisfaction. Initial analyses revealed no significant gender differences relative to any of the four variables. While these findings run counter to those reported by Mosher (1979b) that males demonstrate greater levels of sexual misinformation than females, they permitted all data to be collapsed for further analyses.

The main analyses in this study provided support to Mosher's (1979b) findings that sexual guilt is: a) positively correlated with levels of sexual misinformation and b) negatively related to sexual experience. Both studies revealed that individuals with higher levels of sexual guilt tend to endorse more of the common

myths and fallacies which constituted the measure of sexual misinformation. One possible explanation of this phenomenon, based upon Schwartz's (1973) work, is that persons who are higher in sex guilt may experience an anxiety which predisposes them to avoid many sources of accurate sexual information. Additionally, both studies indicated individuals with higher levels of sexual guilt report lower levels of sexual experience than their low sexual guilt counterparts. While it is difficult to assign causuality in either direction, pairing these data with that reported by other researchers investigating the behavioral inhibition effect of guilt (e.g., Schill & Chapin, 1972), it can be speculated sexual guilt can be a powerful affective and cognitive predeterminant of behavior.

An additional finding, previously unsubstantiated, is a negative relationship between sexual misinformation and experience. It has already been demonstrated that those high in sex guilt will tend to be higher in their endorsements of sexual myths or misinformation. These sexually guilty individuals will also be less likely to make use of an opportunity to correct their faulty sexual notions by exposing themselves directly to sex, as evidenced by the previously described inverse relationship between sexual guilt and level of sexual experience. Therefore, it may be that sexual experience performs an educative function in dispelling myths about sexuality, an opportunity for learning

which would be missed by those individuals who have had fewer sexual experiences.

In investigating the additional variable of sexual satisfaction, it was found sexual satisfaction has: a) a negative relationship with sex guilt; b) a positive relationship with sex experience; and c) no statistically significant relationship with misinformation. The first of these findings supports those reported by Murray (1978) that women with high sex guilt reported less satisfaction with their sexual lives. It is possible that the same negative emotions which induce guilty persons to avoid sexual experience will also inhibit them from expressing their sexual nature in a constructive and productive manner.

Results indicating sexual satisfaction is positively correlated with sexual experience further supports the work of Murray (1978). It seems somewhat intuitive that those who derive more pleasure from sex will tend to do it more often. On the other hand, another issue to consider is that consistently having rewarding sexual experiences does not necessarily occur automatically, but instead often has to be worked at and explored. Hence, experience and satisfaction may be truly reciprocal, each one promoting and enhancing the other.

The last of these findings, that sexual satisfaction has no statistically significant relationship with sexual misinformation, is surprising in light of the positive correlation obtained

between guilt and misinformation and the negative correlation found between guilt and satisfaction. It would appear that there are two entirely separate and unrelated effects of high levels of sexual guilt. The first, which could be thought of as more cognitive in nature, may interfere with the processing of sexual information resulting in higher levels of misinformation, while the other effect might be more affective in nature, inhibiting the attainment of enjoyment or satisfaction in connection with sex.

There are several issues to take into account when interpreting the results of this study, foremost of which are the limitations presented by the subject population and the nature of the measuring instruments. The study relied upon the voluntary participation of the subjects, as highlighted by the 44% return rate of the questionnaire. Perhaps it is just those individuals who are highest in sex guilt that were least likely to volunteer for a study on sexual attitudes and beliefs, an occurrence which would skew any obtained results. Also, even though a more representative sample than just "Introduction to Psychology" students was obtained, the subjects where nonetheless college students, a fact which brings into question the generalizability of any conclusions. Lastly, the fact that the investigation involved strictly self-report data should provoke caution. It has been repeatedly demonstrated by social psychologists that respondents often attempt to put themselves in the best light in

self-reports. This may be particularly true with such an emotionally important issue as sex. A final point to consider before drawing any conclusions is the correlational nature of this study, which precludes any attempt to ascribe causuality to the findings.

Even with the limitations taken into account, the results of this study offer conclusions which may be of clinical import. First, as awareness of possible emotional bases of sexual dissatisfaction increases, so too do possible avenues for alleviation or amelioration. In this respect, for example, an important consideration when treating a couple for sexual dissatisfaction may well be feelings of guilt associated with past and present sexuality, a conclusion supported by Mosher's (1979a) findings that an individual's sexual satisfaction is related to level of sexual guilt in her partner. Furthermore, these results suggest that education and experience may be one of the most effective modes for the alleviation of sexual guilt.

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Table 1

Intercorrelationships Between Sexual Guilt, Experience, Misinformation and Satisfaction

	SG	SE	SM	SS1	SS2	SS3
Sex Guilt (SG)	------	.30***	-.29***	-.17*	-.33***	-.02
Sex Experience (SE)		------	-.18*	.21*	.37***	.11
Sex Misinformation (SM)			------	.09	.00	.07
Sex Satisfaction						
Scale 1 (SS1)				------	.34***	.54***
Scale 2 (SS2)					------	.23**
Scale 3 (SS3)						------

* p .05

** p .01

*** p .001